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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

POLITICS | March 12, 2013, 5:30 p.m. ET

# Obama, Democrats Discuss Safety-Net Programs

By SIOBHAN HUGHES

WASHINGTON—President [Barack Obama](#), meeting behind closed doors with Senate Democrats on Tuesday, indicated he was open to negotiating changes to entitlement programs, something that Republicans have demanded, according to lawmakers who attended the meeting.

Mr. Obama met with Senate Democrats as he was making a new push with lawmakers to reach a broad deficit-reduction deal. Lawmakers emerging from the meeting said Mr. Obama had a wide-ranging conversation with Senate Democrats on sensitive party issues surrounding federal safety-net programs. They said he also spoke about immigration policy, drones and cybersecurity matters.

It was in the conversation about programs such as Medicare and Social Security that the president appeared to raise hackles among the liberal wing of the caucus.



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Obama leaves after a meeting with the Senate Democratic Caucus on Capitol Hill in Washington on Tuesday.

"I think he is more inclined to cut benefits, which I strongly disagree with," said Sen. Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.) after leaving the closed-door meeting.

Mr. Obama, who will meet separately with congressional Republicans on Wednesday and Thursday, didn't get into any specific proposals for tackling the costs of entitlement programs, numerous senators said. But "the president was pretty clear that we need to have these programs sustainable and that it's reasonable to look at it," said Sen. Ben Cardin (D., Md.).

Republicans have urged Mr. Obama to use the presidential bully pulpit to make Americans aware of the costs of entitlement programs. Over the weekend, Sen. Tom Coburn (R., Okla.) said on "Meet the Press" that he heard the first signs that Mr. Obama would "start talking to the American public about the problem." He said that Mr.

Obama appeared to be sincere.

That is a concern for many Democrats, who are afraid that Mr. Obama will give in to Republican demands and deal with fiscal imbalances in entitlement programs by cutting benefits. Sen. Tom Harkin (D., Iowa) said that he and others had pushed back against Mr. Obama on proposals to slow the rate of growth in programs like Social Security and Medicare by switching to an alternate way of measuring cost-of-living increases.

"My point and Bernie Sanders's point was when you're talking about entitlements—Social Security and Medicare—there's more than one way to solve that problem," Mr. Harkin told reporters. He said that Mr. Obama's response was "things were open for negotiation."

Asked if anyone asked difficult questions, Sen. Bob Casey (D., Pa.) said "that always happens in our caucus." He said that "sometimes people just express how they want the budget process to unfold and depending on how you interpret that it could be supportive or at variance."

—Corey Boles, Jared Favole, Kristina Peterson and Sara Murray contributed to this article.

**Write to** Siobhan Hughes at [siobhan.hughes@dowjones.com](mailto:siobhan.hughes@dowjones.com)

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